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The numbers game: An ethnic mish-mash

St. Patrick and St. Joseph would have been pleased by the special day held in their honor at the State House recently. The General Assembly session was called off, corned beef and cabbage and Italian meatballs were served and speeches were given to recognize the contributions of the culturally and ethnically rich heritage of this small state of Rhode Island.

But it is in the autumn on the State House lawn that the make-up of this diverse state is better appreciated. At the annual Ethnic Heritage Day festival, the 30 ethnic groups recognized by the Rhode Island Heritage Commission cook their exotic foods, dress in native costumes, demonstrate dances unique to their national backgrounds and help rekindle some of the colorful aspects of their heritage. A reminder of their rich backgrounds and a reminder also of what this nation means.

Approximately 700,000 new people currently come to this country each year. Some come to be with relatives, leaving memories of persecution and deprivation. All are seeking better economic opportunities and the political freedom that is so much cherished by others and sometimes unappreciated by those who have lived here over generations of time.

It is not only the considerable numbers of immigrants that come here now, but also the changing nature and variety of the new arrivals that now catches our attention. The decade of the 1980s, for example, witnessed the largest number of immigrants for any decade in our history. Their makeup is vastly different from that of the mid-1960s. In 1965 there were nine Europeans for every one non-European who came into this country; 20 years later these proportions were reversed.

Blacks from West Africa and the Caribbean, Asians from Southeast and East Asia and Latinos from Central and South America are the major groups of new arrivals that now come to these shores. This massive influx of people from these parts of the world have caused the "racial complexion of the American population to change more dramatically in the past decade than at any time in the 20th century," according to the New York Times.

One result of this different wave of immigrants is that the white proportion of the nation's population dropped from 83.1 percent in 1980 to 80.3 percent in 1990. So it appears that we have come full circle, for this proportion of four whites out of every five people is exactly the same as it was in 1790 at the time of the first US census.

We were a smaller nation in 1790, with fewer than 4 million people on a land area less than one-fourth that of our present size. And in that first census, only whites and blacks were recorded. We have to remember that the Indians and some Spanish and French controlled most of the rest of the area, and they were not about to be counted in the US census.

The proportion of whites increased to 86 percent on the eve of the Civil War in 1860, a result of Europeans coming to seek the better life. In that census year, other racial groups, besides blacks, were recorded, but they comprised only one quarter of one percent of the population.

Minorities were meant to be just that, minorities, based upon legislation passed in the early part of the century, e.g., 100 Chinese and 100

Japanese each year. So from 1910 to 1960, the proportion of whites in the nation remained at just below 90 percent. But with the legislation passed during the Johnson administration in the mid-1960s, increased limits of immigrants were allowed, as well as increased numbers for most countries.

The latest tally of resident Americans in 1990 highlights the increasing numbers of different racial groups and their increasing proportions of the total population. Blacks are still the largest minority group in the nation, at 12.1 percent. The number of blacks in the nation—30 million—grew by 13.2 percent in the past 10 years, twice the 6 percent rate of white increase.

But it was the 37.9 percent increase of American Indian, Eskimo or Aleut; the 45.1 percent of "other"; and the 107.8 percent in-

crease in Asian or Pacific Islander that caught the nation's attention, for this portends the wave of the future.

The 22.4 million Hispanics counted in 1990 represent 9 percent of the total population, and an increase of 53 percent from 1980.

For ethnically diverse Rhode Island, we have the distinction of having had the greatest percentage increase of Asian or Pacific Islander, 245.6 percent, and of Hispanics, 132.2 percent, in the country. Because these groups are still small in numbers, comprising only 1.8 and 4.6 percent respectively of the state's population, we still rank 15th in white proportion of the population, at 91.4 percent.

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